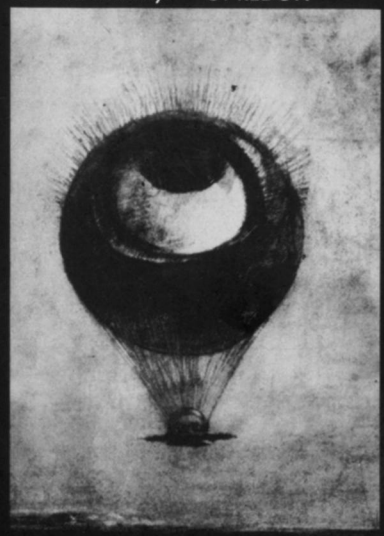
STAN VANDERBEEK

The Cinema Delimina

—FILMS FROM THE UNDERGROUND

"The eye like a mighty balloon ascends toward infinity."—O. REDON



Photos: O. Redon; Mili, by Dali; Avedon;

collage by Vanderbeek

Perhaps it is not possible to rescue cinema from its
living grave? It is after all a black art
of shadows and passing illusions.

No. Film is an art in evolution. It is the dark glass for the physical
and visual change in motion about us. How is it then
that we are suffocated with the cardboard cut-out poetry
of Hollywood?

The mind, eye, and heart of the artist will find a way through the dilemma:
the making of private art that can be made public, rather than
the public art we know, which cannot be made private.

"I am devoting my life to what is inappropriately called 'The Experimental Film,' in America, because I am an artist and, as such, am convinced that freedom of personal expression (that which is called 'experiment' by those who don't understand it) is the natural beginning of any art, and because I love film and am excited above everything else by the possibilities inherent in film as a means of aesthetic expression. And film as an art form is at its beginning, so that most expressive films in our time will, of course, appear as 'experiments.' There is no place for an artist in the film studios, because they have universally adopted theatrical or literary forms and have become extensions of the art of the theatre at best, or the novel at worst. There is virtually no art of the film to be found in any formalized motion picture producing system I know of and probably never will be. It is possible that, some day, there will be patronization of film art. Those who, today, are discovering what that art may be, must learn to accept inattention, and even abuse, and to remain in that state of independence where discovery is still possible."—STAN BRAKHAGE, 1957

But now the most
revolutionary art form
of our time is in the hands
of entertainment merchants,
stars, manufacturers.

The artist is preposterously
cut off from the tools
of production.
The vistavisionaries
of Hollywood,
with their split-level
features and Disney landscapes,
have had the field to themselves.

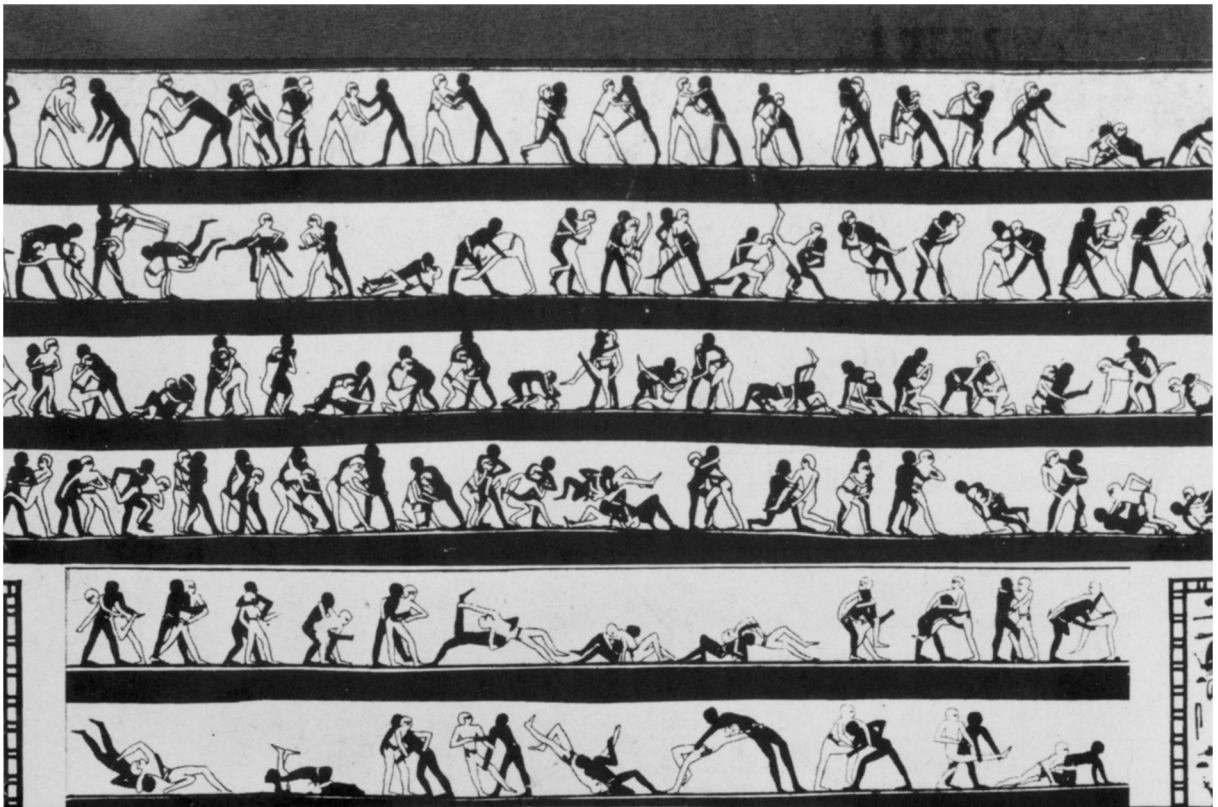
Sequential portrayal of motion in an Egyptian painting.

CAPTIONS ▶

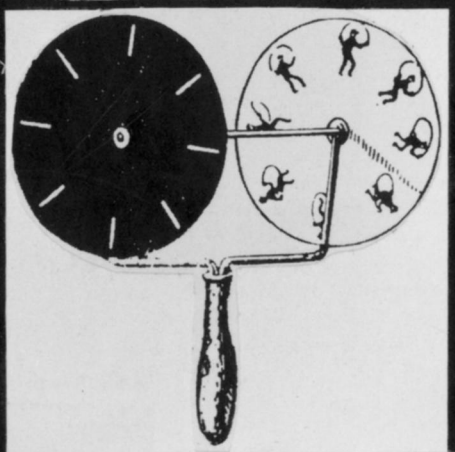
Nineteenth-century Praxinoscope

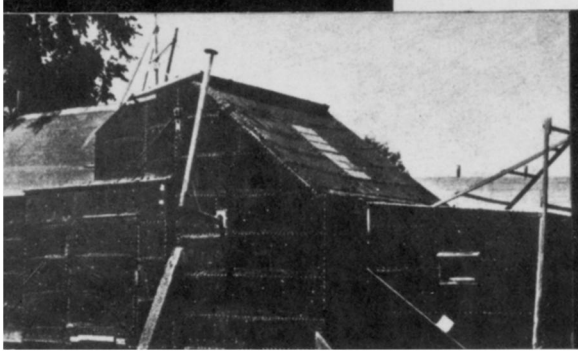
Edison's first movie studio,
"the Black Maria," Orange, N.J.

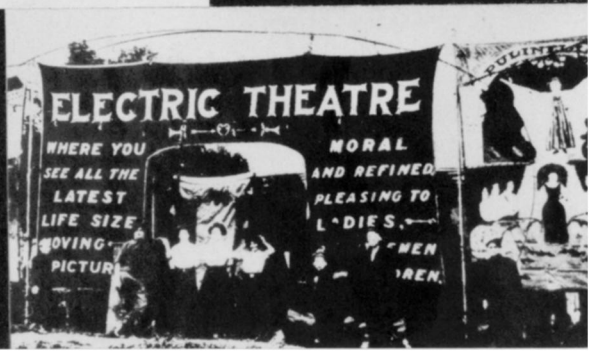
Early cinema on an English
fairground, circa 1905



"Our techniques are improvised, our means are improvised. We are working without a budget (they always ask us: 'What's your budget?'), borrowing money as we go. If we would have started thinking about budgets and unions and distributors, we'd have never started. Now we are close to the end, and nobody will be able to stop us now. They laughingly call us 'beatnik productions.' If that is what it is, so it is, and we are proud of it. We are the true professionals: we know goddamn well what we are doing and what we want to do." —JONAS MEKAS





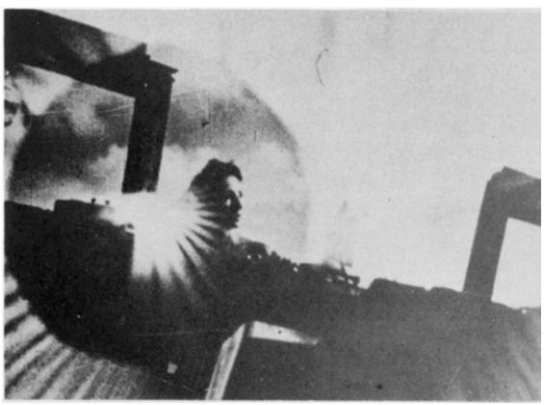


Robert Frank directing
THE SIN OF JESUS
[Photo by Johnny Cohen]

Meanwhile, what of the artists, poets, experimenters in America,
who must work as if
they were
secret members of
the underground?

"I am a refugee from Occupied Hollywood."
—ANDRIES DEINUM

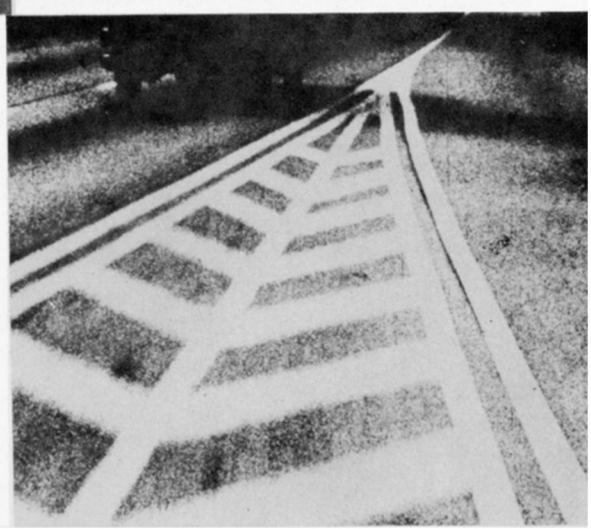
Anais Nin in THE BELLS OF ATLANTIS



Shirley Clarke
on the set of THE CONNECTION
[Photo by Gideon Bachmann]

From ALA-MODE
by Stan Vanderbeek

From HIGHWAY
by Hilary Harris



"The most exciting thing in film is movement. The rhythmic, pulsing, changing progression of images on the screen of a darkened room can be endowed with all the power and magic or delicacy that one can imagine. Out of our eyes all things move and express themselves in their movement. The action of shapes in reality or the abstract can have a wonderful range and depth of communication, from the flick of a cat's tail to the majesty of the earth's rotation. When you begin to think about it every mood, character, animal or place has its kind of movement and, conversely, every movement expresses something."

—HILARY HARRIS

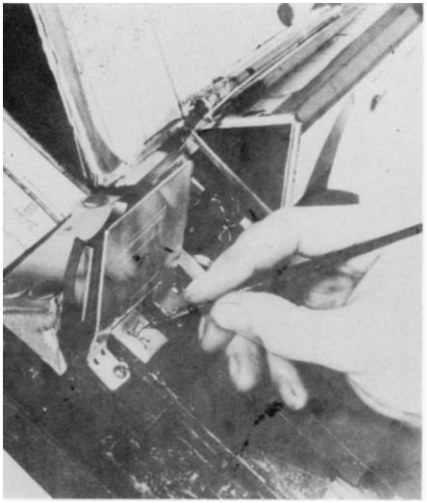
They conjure what they hope will be explosives vivid enough
to rock the status quo:
weapons as potential as fusion, for art
can be as important as politics, the artist's hand more important
than armament!

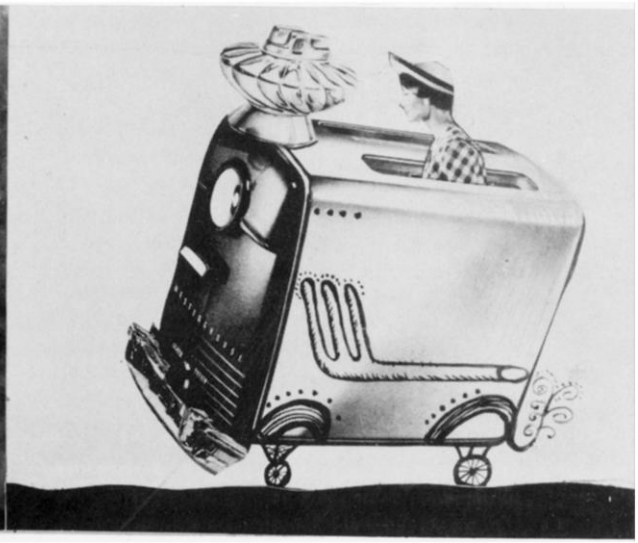
They use any ingredient that comes to hand.

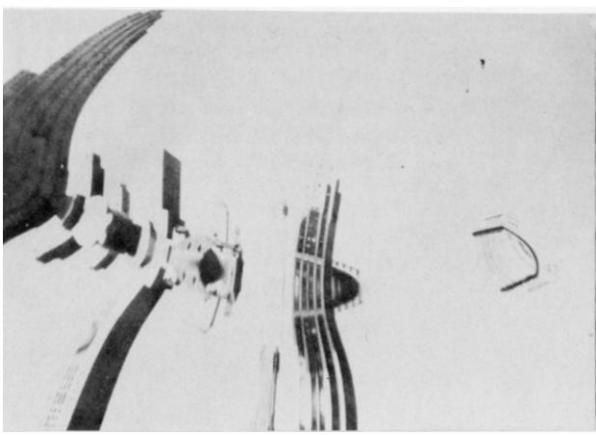
"The first animation stand that I ever built was built around a former lobster crate and for more than a year every time the photo-floods were on long enough to heat up the box out wafted this essence of dead lobster. I've made about five different stands since that one. Many of them were temporary rigs contrived out of things at hand in the places we were renting for short periods. One of these, I remember, was mounted over our bed frame, the mattress being moved back into place at night. For a short animated sequence I did in a French film a couple of years ago, I rented a stand in a dank cave on the outskirts of Paris. It was an unbelievably dismal place with a dirt floor and dripping ceiling. Anyhow, the owner of the camera and the stand I was using was a young Pole who was captured by the invading Russians, joined the Russian Army and took the camera I was using off a Messerschmitt on his way into Germany with the victorious Russians in 1945. His equipment was all home-made and made much and varied use of 'C' clamps to hold things together, as I have since. This summer I had a chance to work on a $17,000 Oxberry stand. This consists of a whole room full of machinery with blinking lights and an airliner type of dashboard, etc. All very impressive to look at but after using it a bit I realized I could do most of these things with my own jerry-built table and sit down at it besides, which you can't do at this monster. Somehow this discrepancy between cost and usefulness is typical of the whole industry. My films are made for little more than most people spend on home movies . . . the problem is how to put a lot of money into a thing which regardless of acceptable polish, for other reasons has no chance of wide enough distribution to ever pay it back. The only answer I can see without prostitution, which is no answer, is to sharpen one's defenses against the temptation to substitute effect for expression and somehow manage to build in the crudeness so it isn't that any longer. One thing many film experimenters have done is to show that film is manageable by one man and the results often much better for it."—Robert Breer

Captions ▶

Norman MacLaren drawing on film
Changeover, *by J. Marzano*
N.Y., N.Y., *by Francis Thompson*
Guns of the Trees, *by Jonas Mekas*
Wheels, *by Stan Vanderbeek*
Introspection, *by Arledge*

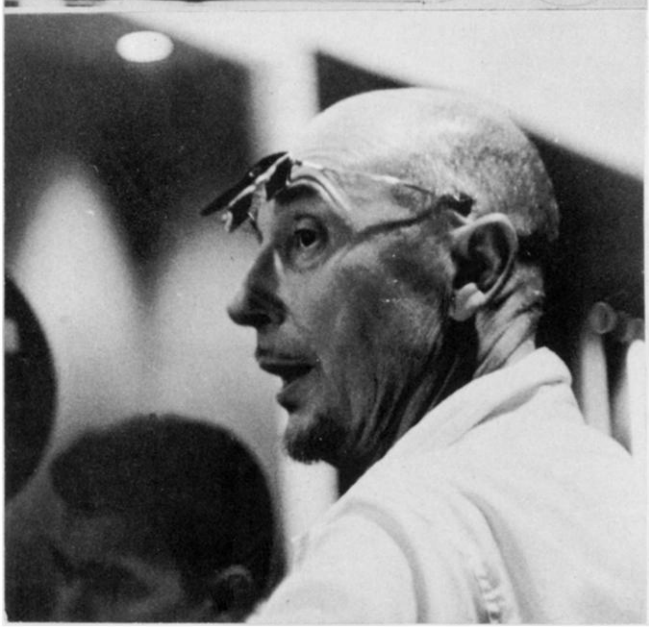






Jonas Mekas directing GUNS OF THE TREES

Robert Frank directing THE SIN OF JESUS



Len Lye

The film is not a fad,
it is not a product,
it is not destined to decorate
drive-in parking lots,
it is not destined to put us
to sleep
but to wake us up.
It is the language of the new art
of our time, and it is an
international language.

"I make films because there is something I want to say . . . if one wants to enough, finally one says what one wants to say on film. Same thing with poetry, painting, acting, only it is more difficult to persist and prevail in making films, besides coming from philosophy to films: I am again and again impressed with the unlimited possibilities you have . . . providing it is *your* film. I believe a good film (any kind of experimental, abstract, etc.) is made by one person . . . despite the considerable effort the making of my films represents (PULL MY DAISY and THE SIN OF JESUS) if your aim is high it should be you that comes through the most . . . (in contrast to where the stars shine, music blasts, color splashes, and blood flows). Films should be made by intelligent people, in television there is enough room for the rest. It's so hard to make a good film but that's why I want to do it no matter what."—ROBERT FRANK

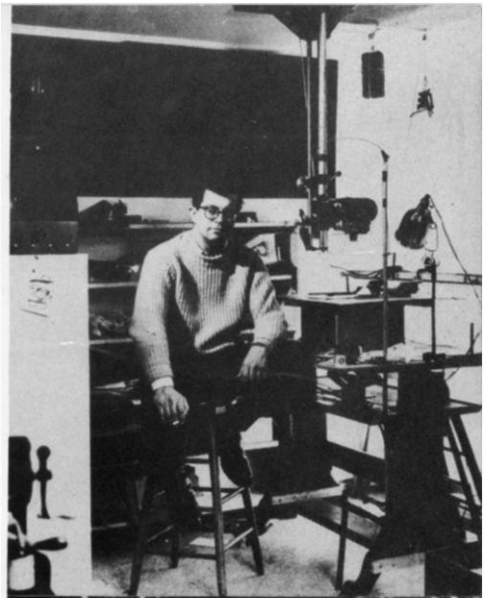
"I intend for my films to not only bear repeated viewings but to almost require it and in this way I suppose they are more related to the plastic arts than to literature. There is usually no denouement in my films in the usual dramatic sense but more of a formal structure appealing (I hope) directly to the senses. My ideal public, therefore, is the art-collector type who would own a print of the film and run it from time to time for the same kind of kicks he might get from a painting."

—ROBERT BREER

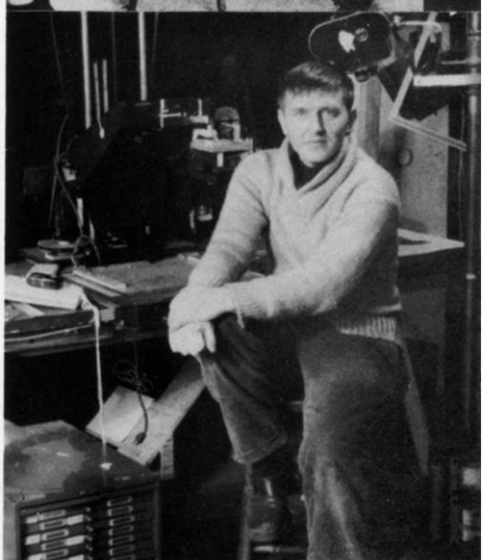
Consider what the film experimenter
is about. He is dealing with the substance
of our visual reality.
With how we seize the world
(or are seized by it).
Motion, time, space, light, shadow:
he is walking the thin edge
between the dream state and the objective
world;
he is picking his way with the methodically
accurate linear instrument the camera,
glimpsing 24 intervals of sight per second.

"How hard it is, when everything encourages us to sleep, though we may look about us with conscious, clinging eye, to wake and yet look about us as in a dream, with eyes that no longer know their function and whose gaze is turned inward."—A. ARTAUD[1]

He struggles with the form as well as the means,
he endures the necessary creative waste,
the stillborn projects that litter the mind.
It is not
a business, with profits to be made.
Yet it requires money. Or we cannot grope toward



Robert Breer



Stan Vanderbeek

Ed Emshwiller

the unconscious image-seeking and making
an evolutionary process of
creating new symbols and meaning
or the actions needed to invade the
body social
with film art. (Say: Gallery-Theaters for
the screening of films so that
collectors
might buy them as they buy
etchings:
a private attitude for the
viewer as for the film-maker.

"If the screen is an important image for entertainment, which is a helluva big industry . . . and for education which has become more and more important . . . and with satellites we are going to be able to get world wide distribution . . . what you're dishing out, the manner in which you are dishing it out should be worthy of the medium. The educationalists and the entertainment people should realize that they have got to find their development through the basic research and discovery which the creative film boys are doing, this is a very simple proposition, they do it in all the other fields, why don't they do it in the screen presentation areas?"—LEN LYE (CONVERSATION)

Cinema is the perfect
mirror surface for art.
but we do not yet understand
its laws of reflection.

"Yet out of this crude equipment came some of the finest photography seen on the screen, and the catalog of innovations is staggering. Many of these innovations began as accidents, which Bitzer turned into practical techniques. A less imaginative and courageous director than Griffith would have hesitated to recognize their esthetic and dramatic value. . . . Inadvertently, by closing the camera iris to the small diameter demanded by brilliant sunlight, Bitzer had brought the end of his lens hood into focus. When Griffith saw the projected film he was far from disappointed. 'He got very excited,' Bitzer told the writer, 'and asked me how I'd gotten the new effect.'"—IRIS BARRY, in *D. W. GRIFFITH* (Museum of Modern Art)[2]

[1] *The Theatre and Its Double*, by Antonin Artaud. Translated by Mary Caroline Richards, published by Grove Press. Reprinted by permission.

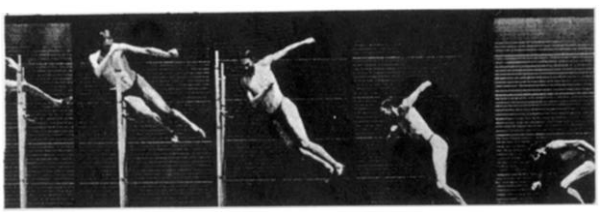
[2] *D. W. Griffith*, by Iris Barry. Published by the Museum of Modern Art. Reprinted by permission.

"When my motion picture camera broke down and the painting on the easel reached an impasse, I grabbed some old exposed and discarded film and threw it into the bath tub. For good measure I sprinkled different color dyes into the water and waited. When the stew seemed gooey enough, I marinated it with a dash of alcohol. (Cognac was all I had. But I left a sufficient amount in the bottle for other purposes.) After scraping all the muck from the film, I mangled it a little more by stomping and sandpapering the emulsion side. Then I hung it up to dry. Finally I cut it up into two feet lengths and began to draw directly on the film with ink. When I glanced at what I had done under a viewer, I was shocked! ! I had made a film! ! So . . . I titled it A TRIP and ran out to find some kind of music to fit, only to find I had the music I needed right here in the studio, a beat up old dusty record . . . somewhat scratched. After distorting the music by speeding up the turntable, I had it put on a soundtrack, cut the film to fit and had them married in one print. The whole production with three finished prints cost me the enormous sum of Twenty-Five Dollars! ! Hollywood could do it all for a slightly larger budget."—CARMEN D'AVINO

We know the eye will follow a moving image more closely
than a stationary one, by the instinct of the
beast in the field or the man at the intersection.
We are all compelled toward motion and change and
moving pictures.

This is the mechanical metaphysic of our time.

"It is possible that after nearly 400 years of art that has been preoccupied with artificial realism (growing directly out of the theory of perspective and its effect on the senses) this preoccupation has at last reached its ultimate form in photography and in particular motion photography. It is part of the interesting intrigue of art that at this same juncture in the crossroads of art, with the perfection of a means to exactly capture perspective and realism, that the artist's visions are turning more to his interior, and in a sense to an infinite exterior, abandoning the logics of aesthetics, springing full blown into a juxtaposed and simultaneous world that ignores the one-point-perspective mind, the one-point-perspective lens."—STAN VANDERBEEK

We do not say "experimental painting"; painting is
a repaired medium,
constantly patched and reworked through the centuries,
accepted through endless growth. Is the label
"experimental film"
to say that we cannot deny
the cinema is still an
unknown, only hinted at
by hindsight, fantasy, dreams,
hallucinations, comedy?

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